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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000180

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AF/S FOR D. MOZENA, B. NEULING
NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR C. COURVILLE

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER POSTPONES WASHINGTON VISIT,
PREVIEWS ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

1. (C) SUMMARY: MDC President Morgan Tsvangirai told the Ambassador on February 2 that he needed to stay in Zimbabwe to focus on the upcoming parliamentary elections instead of traveling to the United States and Canada next week as earlier planned. Tsvangirai was optimistic about the party's chances as it prepared to re-enter the campaign arena with resurgent energy. He said that the party was exploiting new campaign space and a surprisingly tolerant posture by the police. The party would redouble its outreach to civil society, with which it continued to have differences. END SUMMARY.

Washington Trip Off

2. (C) During a meeting at the Residence, Tsvangirai said the press of election-related business and the fact that key Administration officials would be out of town, especially the Secretary, had led him to defer his planned trip to New York

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and Washington. He added that the visit might be more appropriate after the election in any event since the government would almost certainly have tried to make political capital out of a visit at this time by accusing him of running off to Washington "to get orders from Bush" the minute elections were called.

Plan A: Win the Election

3. (C) Emerging from the first day of a two-day meeting of the MDC's national executive to discuss the election, an upbeat Tsvangirai described intra-party atmospherics as uplifting. The party had finished candidate selection for the parliamentary races with little of the rancor associated with ZANU-PF's primary process. Tsvangirai would not forecast the party's likely seat count in the election, which has been set for March 31, but said the MDC would "win." He quickly sketched MDC prospects across the country. He predicted that the MDC would hold its seats in Harare and Bulawayo, excluding the three seats recently gerry-mandered out; would increase its representation Manicaland and Masvingo; would win most urban seats and possibly a couple of rural ones in Midlands, and Mashonaland East, West and Central. Elaborating on campaign priorities, Tsvangirai said sitting urban MPs were essentially on their own. The party leadership, including Tsvangirai, would focus its energies principally on marginal constituencies. Unlike their ZANU-PF counterparts, MDC MPs had little to deliver their constituencies in terms of basic wants, and would have to rely in many cases on "basic minimum social interventions" and show a strong physical presence in their districts.

4. (C) Tsvangirai was optimistic that the party would be able to exploit growing political space. He was encouraged by the numbers and enthusiasm he was seeing at rallies throughout the country. The impending reinstatement of the Daily News and access to Zimbabwe television in March would prove decisive in overcoming voter apathy and getting out the vote. (Note: Rumors are flying that the GOZ will permit resumed operations by The Daily News, the daily independent shut down by the GOZ in 2003, upon the issuance of an expected Supreme Court decision in the paper's favor on February 7. End Note.) The police's increasingly constructive posture was potentially pivotal; he noted that police leadership had approached the party leadership to coordinate security, including in some rural areas. Local party structures were effectively using Police Commissioner Chihuri's publicized statements insisting on tolerance and non-violence in resisting customary local ruling party efforts to forcibly conscript people for party rallies. He reported that local ZANU-PF structures in some areas were challenged by their leadership's public directives on non-violence and were pleading the leadership to be unleashed if the party wanted to win. Tsvangirai concluded that the overconfident ZANU-PF leadership had lost its base and was in a dilemma that it might not fully appreciate as to the pivotal role played by fear in its control over the country. He added that the MDC would structure its campaign so as to

keep ZANU-PF complacent. There would be no mass rallies this time around that could alert the ruling party to the MDC's popularity and that might provoke violence or fraud.

15. (C) Tsvangirai said that the MDC would run on a platform built on the need for change. Rule of law, human rights, land use, education, housing, jobs, economic reconstruction would all be issues but the main theme would be the need to end the criminality⁸ of ZANU-PF rule. He added that in the event the MDC won a majority in parliament it would in essence make the country ungovernable in order to drive President Mugabe from power. Its first order of business would be to repeal repressive legislation such as POSA, AIPPA, and the NGO bill. He said that under the Zimbabwe constitution, the president could only veto a bill twice, if parliament subsequently passed the bill again, it would become law after 60 days. Finally, he noted that an MDC majority in parliament would also work to amend the constitution to remove the president's power to name the government without parliamentary approval.

Plan B: a Little Vague

16. (C) According to Tsvangirai, the party had been working on a "Plan B" if the election results proved untenable. The main ideas were to paint the elections as having been inherently unfair, that the MDC had only participated out of deference to the wishes of its supporters, and that neither the party, the region, or the international community should recognize another illegitimate election. The party would also maintain pressure on the regime by keeping its supporters motivated and it would use whatever foothold it retained in Parliament to obstruct the ruling party's legislative and constitutional plans.

Skepticism on Civil Society, South Africa

17. (C) On the Ambassador's inquiry, the MDC leader reported that he would be meeting within the next few days with ZCTU and civil society figures to discuss strategies. He acknowledged continued differences with some, notably Lovemore Madhuku's National Constitutional Assembly, and was dismissive of others, but said they "were coming around."

18. (C) Turning to South Africa, Tsvangirai asserted that the ANC leadership had gradually shifted away from ZANU-PF. He worried, nonetheless, that the spy scandal had weakened Mbeki's hand and the Mugabe would more freely snub him and SAG efforts.

Coltart's Take

19. (C) During a meeting at the Embassy earlier in the day, MDC Shadow Minister of Justice David Coltart told the Ambassador that party spirits were indeed high as it prepared to re-enter the race officially. He said that he had not seen such numbers at his own rallies in a long time and party structures were stronger and better organized than ever before. The regime was fragile, and would be susceptible to breakdown given the right spark. Its recent purge of "Young Turks" left the ruling party with even fewer capable leaders, exacerbating its problems in managing the Parliament and policy agendas.

110. (C) Nonetheless, he predicted that the party would win only 25 seats in the election because of various forms of ruling party rigging. He said intimidation and official harassment continued to be impediments for MDC candidates, as reflected by the detentions of MDC MPs Chamisa and Thuke in recent weeks. (Note: Each was released within 24 hours, as is customary in such cases. End note.) Coltart emphasized the importance of international pressure on Zimbabwe, and in that vein complimented the President's and Secretary Rice's recent public remarks about the need to confront tyranny. He stressed the pivotal role of USG assistance in the survival of democratic forces and civil society in Zimbabwe but expressed concern that the strong messages coming from Washington would be offset by shrinking resources for democratic forces in Zimbabwe.

Comment

111. (C) The MDC is re-energized by the continued opening of campaign space, by the surprisingly tolerant posture of the police, and by the prospects for more media coverage. Many MDC leaders are genuinely optimistic about their prospects in this election, even as they are preparing the groundwork for protests should they lose. The MDC's February 3 official announcement that it would participate in elections (e-mailed to AF/S) echoed Coltart's dismal assessment of Zimbabwe's election environment and was at odds with Tsvangirai's more upbeat appraisal. It was, however, consistent with MDC plans

to protest the tilted playing field in the event of electoral defeat. That said, the biggest obstacle to their electoral prospects may not be renewed violence or fraud on the part of the ruling party. Rather, it may be their inability to articulate a clear message of how an MDC parliament will make people,s lives better and thereby energize an otherwise passive, already intimidated electorate. Tsvangirai offered few details of the MDC,s platform or its positive message. Instead, 50 days before the election, one has the sense that he believes the election will be a referendum on ZANU-PF misrule and that the MDC has only to call attention to that misrule to win.

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